### Design, build, and playability all combine in Yamaha's over-engineered-but-way-hip SG-3 guitars from the 1960s.

For better or worse, I have my email out there in the ether for anyone to ask me questions about old guitars. Sometimes I can genuinely help folks, and other times people just want to chat and share stories. The most common question I get is, "What is your favorite old Japanese guitar?"

That's tough for me to answer. I'm often in awe of a design. Other times, I admire a guitar's build and playability. Then, of course, I dig the tones of certain guitars. But when I bring it all together and combine all the factors, the answer can be pared down to the late–1960s Yamaha SG-3 guitars.

The SG-3 (and the two pickup SG-2) was really Yamaha's first foray into electric guitar building on a large scale. Located in Hamamatsu, Japan, Yamaha was—and still is—quite the prolific company. Back in the '60s, they had a rather large musical instrument department that made just about everything, from pianos and drums to amplifiers and stereo equipment. When the company started making electric guitars, everything was designed and produced in-house. And boy, did they ever succeed.

See, the SG-3 was designed in part with some help from musicians, electricians, and machinists who all came together in that admirable Japanese fashion where the finished product is a reflection of the best collective efforts put into it. These guitars were substantial and probably over-engineered, in a sense. These weren't the guitars we'd find at the local department store, and the SG-3 had a rather regal price tag of $249.50, which was a lot of bread!

The foundation of the SG-3 was certainly influenced by Mosrites and Fender's Jazzmasters and Jaguars, with an offset body, metal nut, slim neck, 25½" scale, and a powerful sound. The pickups are rather aggressive for the times, and that chunkier bridge unit is really where the magic lies. Those are actually two single-coils in that humbucker-looking housing, but they are differently designed. The one closest to the bridge has an extra magnet under the coils and then a metal bridge plate under that. That means the first bridge pickup is just meaner and more aggressive than the other ones. It's a cool idea when paired with the roller control on the upper bout.

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While the lower bout has a simple 3-way switch for all the pickups, the upper has a switch to engage the blender feature. This allows you to use that last roller to blend in that first pickup, combine it with the middle pickup, or turn it completely off. Yes, it's overly complicated but, once you find a sweet spot, good grief! The other rollers and knobs are simply volume and tone controls.

Aside from the electronics, you have to really appreciate the masterful roller-bridge and tremolo, which actually work very well. Heck, even the truss rod is "hidden" under a pseudo neck plate that allows for easy adjustment. The earliest versions of the SG-3 had an ultra-cool script motorcycle logo. Color choices were limited to sunburst, red and white, and all the guitars featured a poly finish.

As far as feel goes, the necks on these models are a little on the thinner side and the bodies are a little thicker, which to me feels like it's a mix of a Jazzmaster and a Mosrite. The offset body feels like a combination of both guitars and is well-balanced when strapped on. Link Wray famously used a red SG-2 for many years, and that's probably where I first saw one of these in action.

This model had a relatively short run, with production starting in mid-1966 and ending by the late 1960s. These Yamaha SG guitars didn't seem to sell very well here in the U.S. Most examples were brought back by servicemen stationed overseas, but you can find SG-3 guitars all over Japan, and it's a super special treat to discover the original cases, which often include a cute little vinyl bag of accessories.

So, now that you know my all-time favorite Japanese guitar, please don't go out

You're close, but not quite. The regular volume/tone knobs are master volume and tone(all pickups). The thumbwheels are as follows: wheel closest to bridge is indeed the blend (or as Yamaha called it, a "balancer") for the two pickups nearest the bridge. The other two thumbwheels control the volume and tone for the neck pickup, but *only* when the black slider switch is set to the "rhythm" position, which, when toggled, deactivates the bridge pickup(s) and just gives you the neck pickup by itself. It's a setup inspired by the rhythm/lead thumbwheel/toggle layout on Fender Jazzmasters and Jaguars.

Features: - the round Yamaha logo on the [headstock](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Headstock) is not a decal, it's a die cast metal piece with chrome tuning forks (the Yamaha logo) raised above a black background. You can turn it with your fingers on my guitar but it doesn't come off - you can also see in the picture that the Yamaha brand name appears on the neck plate. This is also chrome and black but is a stamping not a casting. And this isn't actually a neck plate because it doesn't hold the neck on. If you remove the four screws this plate comes off, you will then see the actual neck plate which has four larger screws holding the neck on. The neck plate has a rectangular "window" in it to allow you to access the truss rod through a hole through the body into the back of the neck (that's right, the truss is accessed through the back of the neck). - All three pickups are identical. They have adjustable pole piece screws. The black and silver areas that you see are actually the tops of the pickup bobbins themselves. The black and silver areas are covered by a domed clear plastic piece. I took the guitar apart a few years ago to give it a good cleaning. I found that the pickups are not held in place with springs at the height adjustment screws like normal pickups, but instead had a large foam rubber block under the body of each pickup. The fretboard is quite thin. Thin enough that the side dots are actually located on the split line between the fretboard material and the wood of the neck. The guitar's serial number is stamped directly into the fretboard between two of the lower frets. - Yamaha was obviously proud of this guitar, and put their name and logo all over it. Besides the Yamaha name on the tuning machines, it has the Yamaha decal and die cast logo on the headstock, the name and logo on the neck plate and the name and logo are molded into the bridge pickup ring between the two bridge pickups. - The SG2 and SG3 were Yamaha's first electric guitar models, and finish details (as described above) are amazing for a 1965 Japanese guitar. If I lay it down next to my Strat, the Strat looks like a bargain basement model by comparison. Later 1960s models in Yamaha's SG series have far cruder appointments. - As was already noted, the bridge has roller saddles and each saddle is height adjustable. The bridge also has the normal coarse height adjustment screws on each end. There are two sheet metal springs on the ends of the bridge pinching the saddles together so they don't move side-to-side. - The guitar shown here has either a metal or black plastic nut, mine is white plastic. There is, of course, a zero fret. - The string tree is also a good quality chrome plated die casting, not a metal stamping like many guitars of the period. - The main knobs are chrome-plated metal with plastic skirts. As for the roller controls, the mysterious 3rd thumbwheel nearest to the bridge pickup is a balance control for the two bridge pickups. This functions whether the slide switch is in the up or down position. - The remaining two thumbwheels are just like their Fender counterparts; they're a volume control and a tone control that override the main volume and tone controls when the slide switch is in the up position.

Supposedly most of them were sold in Japan, and only a few were exported to the US.

ince buying my Yamaha SG-3 I have been trying to find out whatever I can about it and its sibling, the two-pickup SG-2. Additionally there was a 12-string version, the SG-12, which had the three pickups and electrics of the SG-3 but with a shorter-scale 12-string neck, and there was also a bass with two pickups, the Yamaha SB-2. The SG-12 is supposedly the rarest of the lot, but funnily enough within the last two months two examples have turned up on eBay: one was incomplete, missing various crucial parts such as bridge saddles, and the other had been rather inexpertly “customized” and had none of the original pickups, electrics or pickguard. (If someone had bought both of them, they could have faithfully restored a single SG-12 from the parts of both).In my researches about these guitars, I was finding a lot of misleading and conflicting information. Well, to set the record straight, the SG-2, SG-3 and SB-2 were initially released in April 1966 and were each discontinued in 1967. (I’ve seen people dating these guitars to 1965 and 1968. Not true! They were only produced from 1966-1967). Colours available were limited to pearl white, sunburst, and coral red. I cannot find any data for the SG-12, but it’s reasonable to assume that it was produced within the same 1966-67 period and was available in the same colours (I’ve seen photos of red and sunburst examples). The original retail prices in Japan were 42,000 yen for the SG-2, 48,000 yen for the SG-3, and 37,000 yen for the SB-2 bass. (The bass was a simpler affair with none of the separate circuits for pre-set sounds. More on this later…)Something that confused me greatly was that several people when talking about their SG-2 guitars referred to their short 24″ scale length. That didn’t sound right to me at all. My SG-3,which is essentially the same guitar as the SG-2 but with different pickups and switching, certainly does not handle or feel like an instrument with a Gibson-like 24″ scale. Also remember that I already mentioned the problem we had in the guitar shop finding a gig bag to fit. So, just to make double check, I measured from zero fret to the bridge saddles, and sure enough, I was right: the scale length is definitely 25 1/2″; there is absolutely no doubt about it.Through communication with another owner, I’ve learnt that the SG-2 does indeed have the same 25 1/2″ scale length, but that the SG-12 has a shorter 24.75″ scale which does make some sense when you take into consideration the increased tension offered by 12 strings. Still, I am perplexed that there are players out there who say things like “the short scale of the SG-2 suits my small hands” when they are actually playing a guitar with a longer Fender-like scale. Can they not tell from feel alone? It just goes to show how suggestible people can be; they read something once on the internet and believe it must be true despite any evidence to the contrary.OK, having gotten the scale length question sorted once and for all, let’s move on to the question of what all those switches and controls on the SG-3 actually do. Basically, the guitar features two circuits so you can set up two different tones on the guitar and switch between them, say between rhythm playing and then going for a guitar solo. The volume and tone controls on lower part of the guitar work in the usual way for the main circuit, but the switch nearest the point of the upper horn allows you to select the alternate circuit which has separate volume and tone “wheels” just above the neck pickup. There is a third “wheel” situated slightly apart from the other two, slightly towards the housing for the rear two pickups. With the alternate circuit selected, whatever position on the wheel I tried I could not make any difference to the tone using this control. I began to suspect that someone had re-wired the guitar incorrectly. Then – I don’t know what made me think to try this – I selected the main circuit again, and this time the wheel operated properly and I could hear tonal differences as I rolled it back and forth.But what was it doing? Using an Ebow to ascertain which pickups were actually being selected, I worked out that whilst switched into the main circuit the two pickups in the large pickup housing near the bridge operated as single coils, and you could select one or the other – or a blend between the two – using the roller switch situated above. However, with the alternate circuit engaged these rear two pickups operate together as a humbucker. What had confused me was that the blend control which only worked when the main circuit was engaged was physically located on the pickguard nearer the controls for the alternate circuit, so that I thought it must be related to that same circuit. (I guess you could call these circuits, the “rhythm” and “lead” circuits, but like the “Rhythm/Treble” legend on the pickup selector surround on a Les Paul this is often nonsensical because you can get very useful rhythm sounds using the so-called “Treble” bridge pickup and can also play great solos using the so-called “Rhythm” neck pickup).The Yamaha SG-2 has the same set-up with the two independent circuits, but of course there’s no blend control because it doesn’t have that third pickup.